

Alice, Peter, and Mole

A Four-Level Literature
Teacher Manual

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Four-Level Literature: General Comments

The purpose of this literature program is to immerse children in great books so that they experience literature as literature and not as a drudgery of tedious school activities. I want children's minds on the books themselves and not on attendant assignments. It is by loving to read that children become literate.

The pedagogy of this program is grown-up and reflective; it is deliberately simple, focusing entirely on the reading of the book and avoiding all traditional worksheet activities in favor of rich discussion and thoughtful writing. Busywork has been eliminated. The activities that are included are flexible options, not a rigid system requiring every step every time. In the end if the child does not love reading, we have failed.

This manual is for the classroom teacher. The classroom environment presents the teacher with unique limitations and opportunities. The classroom is a good environment for discussions and Socratic explorations

of ideas. The dynamic relationships between students and teacher provide moments of intense learning that are amplified by the group interactions. On the other hand, classroom teachers see students for limited amounts of time; teachers may have students of various readiness levels in the same classroom, and they usually have to report grades to an administration according to a system that can affect the classroom dynamic adversely. The activities that generate numerical scores may not be activities that increase student enthusiasm for content. Many of the most important things to teach are also the least scorable. Furthermore, classroom teachers have course content and test content that they are expected to cover, and this may limit the amount of time available for a literature program.

Teachers also work in a social culture that can be unintellectual or even anti-intellectual, and this may afford scant support for a teacher determined to bring rigorous, superb reading experiences to the students. The public understanding of the importance of literary classics, of long works, of works with rigorous vocabulary, and of works from previous generations or centuries is not always what a literature teacher would desire. The

teacher may be confronted not only with a lack of understanding but even an intractable opposition to these elements, even though these elements are the very heart of an authentic education.

All too often, great reading that includes these characteristics is rejected as “old-fashioned.” People who know literature well do not think that; it is an impediment to a credible program of literature, and it escalates the very weaknesses that our program is designed to strengthen.

Serious literature—including great children’s literature—is not old-fashioned, regardless of when it was written. High genius does not go out of fashion. Furthermore, Western civilization did not begin thirty years ago. It is no advantage to be able to read only entry-level books of the present generation. Great readers of every age read great writers of every age, and the great readers of our present avidly devour the best books of the past.

Books are the time machine of culture. Whenever they were written, it is now that we read them. It is one of the great joys of the educated mind to read back through time, to read back through the centuries, to read great

books written in the nineteenth century, the eighteenth century, and before. It is exciting to immerse oneself in the English of Jane Austen or of Daniel Defoe. There is a romance in the history of the English language. It is not better if one cannot read the *Declaration of Independence*, or *Gulliver's Travels*, or Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, or Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. We do not want our children's minds to be trapped in contemporary English or contemporary beginner's vocabulary.

Imagine that you lived in a spectacular mountain range, surrounded by famous peaks, but did not know it; you had a high fence, and all you had ever seen was the yard around your house.

We also do not want our children to be capable only of reading short works or excerpts. We want their attention spans to be developed and strengthened. Minds grow from struggle. Life is filled with problems that require long and complex thinking. There is a growth of intellect that occurs in following a story or argument for 300 pages that is unknown to everyone who has not experienced it, and almost all famous works are long. To eliminate long works from the educational program is to eliminate the educational program. It is to eliminate

almost all famous novels. It is to eliminate almost all of the reading that makes one educated. To avoid the long books is to be unread. The current emphasis on short works and excerpts, however well-intentioned, is an educational disaster. Long works are essential.

Short works and excerpts are geared to the instructional minutes available in a one-hour class period; they are not geared to the serious needs of an educated life, and there are abundant ways to incorporate long works into the classroom—ways that have been standard educational practice for centuries.

Finally, we do not want children's reading to focus on works of mere entertainment. Fun is desirable, but there is more to educated reading than fun, and fun is not the most important goal. Greater than fun is meaning. We want children to learn the excitement of thinking, of books that use fiction or nonfiction to disclose important ideas. We do not want children's reading experience to be limited to works of distraction. The educated mind is not a state of oblivion; it is a state of illumination. We want children to know the attraction of serious books with serious ideas that have the chance of being right or wrong. There are novels with memorable characters that

Alice, Peter, and Mole
Vocabulary Prestudy

Here are five words that appear in all three novels. Let us examine them before beginning the trilogy.

capital: interj. or adj.

Capital is an interjection or adjective that we see especially in British novels of the nineteenth century. It expresses delight and is a synonym for *excellent*. In Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, a character does a "capital imitation of a sailor's walk."

fancy: n. or v.

As a noun, a fancy is an attraction or an element of imagination. As a verb, to fancy something is to want it or to imagine it. In *Treasure Island*, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote that the "mutineers were bolder than we fancied."

Alice in Wonderland

A Comment

To read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is to be so transported, so awash in Carroll's waves of nonsense and fantasy that it would be easy to dismiss the book as the product of a disorganized, or frivolous, or hallucinatory mind. You could almost fall unthinkingly into the story, casually assuming that its pointlessness is its point and that its irrationality is its only rationale. You could almost think that there is nothing serious to think about.

Almost.

The problem with a light-minded view of the story is the edge it has, the sharp way it cuts into things we seem to remember. Somehow, for all of its silliness, *Alice* seems to slice not into the isolated nonsense of its own invention but into nonsense that is real. It is not only the story that is absurd; it is the world. We almost cheer at times, though we are laughing, when the story demolishes yet another societal absurdity.

Alice in Wonderland

Language Illustration Questions

The following questions concern the language illustrations that appear in this edition of *Alice in Wonderland*. These questions will promote a thoughtful involvement with what the illustrations reveal about Lewis Carroll's writing.

1. Which two of the language illustrations in Chapters One through Four are your favorites? Why?
2. Explain, in your own words, the point of the first language illustration in Chapter Three, concerning a sentence about the Dodo.
3. There are two illustrations in Chapter Four. Which of these three is most important? Why?

Alice in Wonderland

Character Quotations for Quote Quizzes

Here are quotations that may be used for quote quizzes. I will not provide any certain number per chapter; you may select from them as seems good. I have adjusted capitalization and other details slightly for formatting purposes, but I have not changed any words. Each quotation begins with the number of the chapter in which it is found. I encourage you to use these as models and to enjoy finding more. In practice I did not give quote quizzes every day; when I did give one, I would use three to five quotes, reading each one carefully two times. All the students had to do was to write the name of the character whose words these were.

Notice that the quotations are always the words of a character, never the words of the narrator. If you want to choose some of your own quotations, here are some tips: find quotations that are famous, that have clues in them such as grammar or ways of speaking unique

to a character, that are memorable or repeated, that mention plot details that give them away, or that reveal important aspects of a character's personality. Try to find quotations that should be obvious to any student who really has read the story, not quotations that are subtle, tricky, or overly challenging. We do not want the quote quizzes to be dreaded. Here are some *Alice* quotes that you might like to use:

1. Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late! - Rabbit

 1. After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs! - Alice

 1. What a curious feeling! I must be shutting up like a telescope. - Alice

 2. Oh! the Duchess, the Duchess! Oh! won't she be savage if I've kept her waiting! - Rabbit

 2. London is the capital of Paris, and Paris is the capital of Rome. - Alice
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Alice in Wonderland

Creative Questions and Activities

These options are designed to expand the students' creative and imaginative interaction with the literature. I do not expect every option to be undertaken, and I would like for the students to play a part in choosing the creative activities that they will do.

1. Imagine: You have just learned that the story of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party is wrong and that something else happened at the party. Tell us what really happened!
2. If you were Alice and were going to give the Queen of Hearts a surprise gift—the perfect gift—what would it be? It cannot be anything mentioned in the story. Explain your choice.

Alice in Wonderland

Academic Writing Practice

Very young readers read *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Wind in the Willows*. These are among the favorite titles of children who are beginning to read classics. Students of lower elementary age may not yet be ready to write actual essays and may just be encouraged to address some of these questions either in a nice discussion or in less structured writing.

If the students are advanced enough in academics, we might follow the reading with more formal academic writing practice. Use the standard conventions of formal style: no contractions, no first person. *Essay Voyage* and the *Advanced Academic Writing* books provide the guidelines. I like to provide four or five study questions in advance, and I give the students several days to prepare for the essays. The actual writing will contain three of the questions, with one being mandatory. Each student will chose one of the remaining two to answer.

In this method the students must prepare for all study questions, requiring a good deal of thought. I do not spring surprise questions on the students. I do believe that some student choice is important.

I have provided you with more than five questions; you can select those that you wish to give to the students. You may also replace any of these questions with questions you would like to include, so long as they are intratextual and not critical in nature.

These are Socratic questions that do not favor one answer over another; the evaluation of the essays will be based on the English, the essay structure, and the force of the case that the students make by using quotations.

1. Which character in *Wonderland* upsets Alice the most? Explain?
 2. What is Alice's best quality, in terms of her (good) character, and how does this quality help her survive the adventure through *Wonderland*?
 3. At what point in the story is Alice in the most danger?
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